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NOT EVERYONE IS LOOKING FOR THAT "MADE IN THE USA" LABEL, BUT GUN COLLECTORS LOVE IT LOCK, STOCK AND BARREL. LUCIEN DE GUISE LOOKS AT OBJECTS WITH MORE THAN A DUEL PURPOSE

When a country gets back to its collecting roots, the usual solution is to reach for primeval religious art. In the USA, it's fighting hardware that is winning the day. While gun collecting in most parts of the world is on hold, in America, more than US\$10 million was spent at just three firearm auctions last year.

"Doctors, lawyers and financial specialists make up a large group of buyers, as do business owners," reports Patrick Hogan, owner of Rock Island Auction Company, the largest auction house in terms of lots sold, and one of the few not based in California.

There is a difference between collectors and users, of course. In other countries with a proud gunsmithing tradition, such as the UK or France, even kitchen-knife collections are now treated with suspicion. In Asia, the penalties for illicit collecting

are often the same as for drug smuggling. Despite this, about four percent of Rock Island's buyers are from overseas. Many are from Japan and Taiwan.

Value is something that collectors respect. It is not a fashion pursuit, and the people who do it are rarely seen on stage at Oscar time. Madonna has joined Burt Lancaster by taking an interest in hunting weapons; her preference, however, is for effete English shotgun ensembles.

Clocking up a steady 10 to 20 percent appreciation each year, there are few fireworks with American guns. However, as Patrick Hogan continues, "The market for firearms has grown very rapidly in the last four years." Spectacular results are becoming more commonplace. Weapons of mass destruction have been superseded by weapons of minor destruction, or in the case of a recent record breaker, no destruction at all. The new record for an American gun at auction – \$828,000 – was set last year for an 1849 Colt revolver that had never been fired. This is how collectors most like their weapons.

The second-best option is that it has seen an awful lot of action, preferably involving celebrity law-breakers. Colt is the name most likely to be encountered, partly because Samuel Colt's company produced more than a million revolvers during America's wilder years. A fairly typical example sold for \$176,000 a few years ago. It had been used every day for four months by the legendary Texas Ranger Captain Frank Hamer, who

TRIGGER HAPPY

A complete kit for the 19th century professional buffalo hunter, including a Sharps rifle





This photo: Remington revolver presented to General Meade, who defeated Robert E Lee at the battle of Gettysburg
 Below and detail: An extremely rare double-barrelled Winchester rifle. As Rock Island Auctions – and Roy Rogers – point out: “at 12 pounds, it is very heavy”

eventually took out Bonnie and Clyde in 1934.

The American love of its home-produced armoury is about more than just national pride. Many of the great firearm innovations took place in the US, making American weapons objects of global importance. Colt, Winchester, Smith and Wesson, and Remington engender fanatical loyalty among collectors. Some channel their passion into one particular model, such as the Smith and Wesson number two army revolver that played a significant role in the Civil War. No less than 60 of them turned up at a recent Butterfield’s sale, all collected by one single-minded enthusiast.

Most collectors show brand loyalty to a less specialised degree. They tend to stick with one manufacturer, rather than just one model. While other kids were at the matinee shows cheering on the cowboys or the Indians, these embryonic collectors were rooting for the guy with the Remington M1867 over the one with the Winchester Yellow Boy lever action.



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Alternatively, buyers might opt for a chapter in America’s history and Hoover up every weapon connected with it. The Civil War is a large field to plunder, while certain outlaw periods also offer many possibilities.

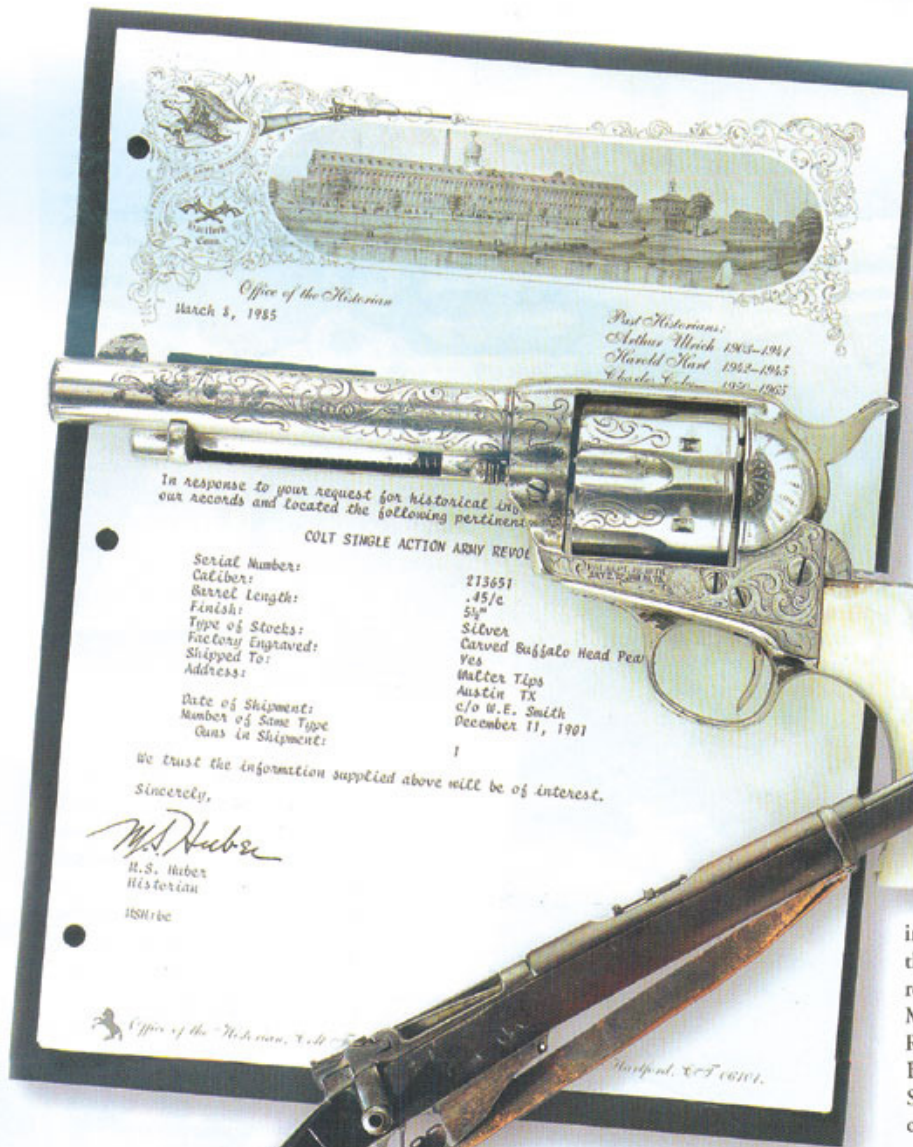
America’s early history is closely connected to firearms. The Second Amendment to their constitution makes this clear: “A well-regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” Most of the great heroes and anti-heroes are men and women

with a gun in their hands – from Annie Oakley to the cast of *Tombstone*.

America’s pioneer heroes were rarely pen pushers, and the further west one travelled, the itchier their trigger fingers tend to have been. High prices are guaranteed when the heirlooms of Jim Bowie – who owned more than knives – and Wild Bill Hickok come on the block. Bowie’s big sale was three years ago, while Wild Bill came to auction last year. Along with the weapons came a surprisingly tender letter to his wife, written just before he was shot at a poker game in the memorably named metropolis of Deadwood, South Dakota.

No other country has the same affection

as America for guns as a symbol of its freewheeling spirit. Although European monarchs were among the first serious collectors of firearms, it is rare to find a French or English man getting emotional about a gun that was used to rob a sub-post office in a remote village. Europeans tend to value guns made to the sporting requirements of the aristocracy. Americans prefer the real thing, although this is usually confined to the past. There is little evidence that the weapon used to winkle Saddam Hussein out of his spider hole will ever



around the world, while US firearms are not. In the past, America also produced shotguns that many consider to be the equals of a Purdey or Holland and Holland. Despite this, the Parker name is more likely to be associated with writing instruments than superb hunting weapons.

Veneration for American guns doesn't mean that auctions in the US are elitist events. While an English sale will be redolent of a gentleman's club, with a fair representation of tweed, the Californian version is more like the Gold Rush. Among guns worth large sums of money you will find Tonka toy pick-up trucks from the 1960s and Texas Ranger hats. The classiest event is the Pall Mall of gun shows, which takes place in Las Vegas.

In a testimonial to the attitude that made the country great, America's firearms auctions are about the last

in the world that are not dominated by the Big Two: Christie's and Sotheby's. The record-breaking Colt was sold at Greg Martin Auctions, while others do well at Rock Island Auction Company, Butterfield's and Little John's Auction Services. These less-international companies can take much of the credit for

For American collectors, a gun is no less a work of art than a samurai sword is to the Japanese

From top: Colt revolver with a distinguished history - previously owned by the celebrated William E Smith "Rough Rider, US Marshall Detective and Texas Ranger" in the early 20th century; Many weapons come from unexpected sources, including this 19th century Winchester-Lee rifle salvaged from the battleship USS Maine

excite collectors as much as the Colt used by lawman JX Biedler to clean up the lawless wastes of Montana in the 1880s.

While it is mainly American collectors who seem to really appreciate American firearms, they do not limit their acquisitions to local products. As it becomes increasingly difficult for buyers

anywhere else to hold a licence, US collectors are buying more of the rest of the world's weaponry. English shotguns and French duelling pistols are among the most popular purchases at the major gun auctions. Any of these countries is bound to be upset if part of their artistic patrimony heads for foreign shores, but they don't notice the exit of firearms that would be considered national treasures in the US.

For American collectors, a beautifully crafted gun is no less a work of art than a samurai sword is to the Japanese. The only difference is that *katana* are admired

changing firearms from utility items into objects of semi-sacred appeal. Instead of hiding them in the dingiest monochromatic corners of their catalogues, they came out of the closet with guns blazing. Having been given the right treatment, these lots have become among the most collectible relics of America's past. Turning guns into objets d'art has not removed the technical mystique, however. Buyers must be prepared for catalogues with details such as "75-85 percent drifting blue on frame." This is not a field for the uninitiated, nor for those without a licence. ■